



COLLEGE
STAFF

A heartfelt thank you!

by **Leigh Powell**, UNISON national officer for further education



We're back! The FE newsletter was put on hold whilst we all dealt with the tumultuous 18 months since COVID-19 entered our lives.

We thank you from the bottom of our hearts for the enormous efforts you went to ensuring that colleges could serve their learners and we will all continue to work hard to ensure that colleges are safe working and learning environments this year. In this edition we are looking at what is happening in the skills sector and what you told us about your mental health during the pandemic.

Just how often do we hear stories

from employers and policy makers in the news, bemoaning the skills gap in the UK? Too much for our liking. Investing in your people should be a key aim of every government and every employer but it can't just be left to chance.

In this newsletter you'll hear about the huge Skills for the Future survey of public sector employees conducted by our great team in Learning and Organising Services. One particularly concerning finding relates to those with low skills and/or qualifications, who were significantly less likely to receive training or even to see the benefits of training. This clearly impacts on their lives and future opportunities. This is where

UNISON can really help to make a difference, by working with employers to highlight their responsibilities and giving members the confidence to self-advocate.

We're also pleased that Sarfraz Ahmed, our UNISON learning rep and careers adviser from Leicester College, has once again written a great article for us. In this edition he looks at a situation that many of us struggle with – how to respond when we go for a job interview up against an internal candidate. We love to hear from our members as we can all learn from each other's experiences. If you would like to contribute to the next newsletter, please write to me at education@unison.co.uk.

Skills for the Future Survey

In December 2020 UNISON's comprehensive Skills for the Future survey (November 2019) was updated to explore the effect of the pandemic on public sector skills needs. This extensive research records 38,000 public service workers' experiences, hopes and fears around learning, training and the future of work. If you would like to find out more please visit: <https://learning.unison.org.uk/2019/11/14/skills-for-the-future>

Survey respondents were overwhelmingly keen to learn, with half stating that training had improved the way that they did their job, and over four fifths saying that they were ready to learn new skills.

Respondents fear that they are not being provided with the training they need to keep up with advances in technology and other changes in the workplace. They are also worried about the risk of redundancy. Over a third said that it was 'very likely' that their position would be made redundant within the next three years, and three fifths said that automation is putting public sector jobs at risk.

More than one in ten survey respondents said that a lack of skills or confidence in literacy or numeracy had stopped them applying for a promotion, taking on

extra responsibilities at work, or asking to attend training.

But the research also suggested that the main problem was under-utilisation and that most workers had skills greater than those needed for their job but were prevented from progressing in their careers by a lack of in-work training.

Two thirds of respondents thought that their computer and digital skills needed improving, and nearly half identified a need for training in managerial or supervisory skills in 2019. These two areas have been impacted considerably by COVID-19.

New and modified activities and initiatives in digital have been considerable, but the identified need for training in management skills has not received anywhere

near enough consideration.

A stand-out, and concerning, finding from the report was in how members felt about the future of work. The vast majority of respondents, nearly 3 in 5 told us they felt "worried" with only 1 in 5 feeling "confident" and very few feeling "excited".

Teresa Donegan, head of learning and organising services, said, 'The most precious asset that any employer possesses is its staff, which is an asset that should be invested in. We often hear what industries and employers want from the workforce. What makes this research unique is the fact that this is the voice of the workers. Staff have told us what they need. Now we want the government and employers to listen.'

'UNISON is justifiably proud of the learning we offer our members. We support thousands of people every year through free learning opportunities. But we shouldn't be filling the gaps left by employers shirking their responsibilities.'



New Regional Leads

If you've ever wondered about who leads for FE in your area we're delighted to introduce you to a selection of our wonderful FE Leads. Some new and some old (or should we say experienced....). You can help influence national FE policy by attending regional forums – just contact your branch to find out how.



North West region **Meet Andy Rutherford**



I have been the lead in the North West for about two years. It has been extremely busy with the challenges faced by members from

pay, restructures, shared services and redundancies. Organising within the sector is our biggest priority in the North West – not only increasing membership, but building the number of active stewards that help us take on the many challenges that continually come our way. The Regional FE and 6th Form Committee meets three times per year. If you would like to become involved and attend the Committee, you would be very welcome.

Please contact your local branch or send me an email at a.rutherford@unison.co.uk. The meetings are very welcoming and supportive and are great way to meet colleagues, share good practice and receive advise on issues that further education staff face.

South West region **Meet Tom Kennedy-Hughes**



Hi, I'm Tom the FE lead for the South West. Recently, I have been supporting FE activists to set up a negotiating

committee and submit pay claims where the employer is not following the Association of Colleges negotiations. My aim is to support UNISON FE stewards to influence the change that our members want.

South East region **Meet Deborah Gardiner**



I am Deb Gardiner and I have been an Area Organiser in the South East for five years. I previously worked for longer than

I am prepared to divulge in a local government branch. I am based on the Isle of Wight but also cover mainland branches in the Portsmouth area. I have only recently taken over the FE Lead role, but am looking forward to meeting the current activists and, crucially, trying to encourage more members to get active. I also want branches to give more prominence to FE members in their activities.

Northern Ireland **Meet Susan Neill**



Hi, I'm Susan Neill, I have been an area organiser for 7 years and I've been supporting the FE sector for approximately 3

years. I'm eager to set up a forum for our members in NI. The forum will be a great way to discuss issues and concerns affecting our members, find out what's going on in other areas and get more involved in our regional campaigns. If you would like to become involved in the forum please contact your branch <https://www.unison-ni.org.uk/branches> or send me an email s.neill@unison.co.uk

Pay updates

England

This year's pay claim is in the process of being finalised. We will be calling for a substantial pay rise that reflects the huge pressure that staff were put under during the course of the pandemic to change working practices quickly and ensure that learners were able to continue despite the extremely challenging circumstances they found themselves in.

Wales

The joint trade unions have submitted this year's pay claim to Colegau Cymru calling for:

- A significant increase in pay to reflect the efforts of the last year and the below inflation raises for the past decade or more.
- Implementation of the recommendations presented to the WNCFE.
- A drafting group established by the WNCFE with the specific remit of finalising an all-Wales pay scale for support staff.

The assimilation from college pay scales to the new national pay.

Scotland

The staff-side pay claim is currently be prepared. Alongside this, scoring from the national job evaluation exercise (ECC/FEDRA) is due to be completed by December 2021 and preliminary discussions have begun on the new national pay and grading model via a joint pay and grading working party.

Northern Ireland

Our membership is made up of directly employed staff and outsourced staff. Directly employed staff follow the NJC pay uplifts, however we have to pursue an agreement. Ehen directly employed staff pay moves, we pursue a pay claim to the contactors for the outsourced staff. The Trade Union Side of the NJC submitted the pay claim for 2021/2022, which was a substantial increase with a minimum of 10% on all spinal column points. The employer came back with a 1.5% offer, which was rejected by trade union side and we are currently waiting on the employers' response. To keep up to date with our campaign for a decent pay rise please visit our website www.unison-ni.org.uk

Sixth Form Colleges Pay Update

UNISON submitted the 2021/22 pay claim for support staff working in sixth form colleges in July 2021. The claim calls for:

- A substantial increase on all salary scales and allowances with a commitment to a 'Living Wage' for all staff.
- An increase in the support staff standards payment
- An additional day's leave for all support staff
- Harmonisation of London weighting areas

Negotiations will begin in the Autumn term. Keep up to date with what is happening at www.unison.org.uk/colleges

Follow us on Twitter **@UNISON_FE** or find us on Facebook by searching UNISON Campaigning in Further Education and Sixth Form Colleges.

Not in UNISON yet?
Join the college support staff experts at
join.unison.org.uk
or call 0800 171 2193.

The Inside Job

In this article, Sarfraz Ahmed, a careers advisor from Leicester College, gives us advice on a situation that many of us have faced: how to deal with job interviews when you are competing with an internal candidate.



So, what is the 'Inside Job'?

I first came across the term when working with a client who had been to many job interviews, but was unsuccessful. He reflected on the interview but couldn't think of anything that he could have done better, then he mentioned that it was an 'inside job'. After probing deeper, I discovered that what he actually meant, was that an internal candidate got the job and this wasn't the first time this had happened. He felt the candidate had several advantages coming from the 'inside'. These were:

- The internal candidate already knew the culture, priorities and ethos of the organisation.
- They perhaps already knew the department and had built up a working relationship with those on the interview panel.
- They may have already had a reputation in the department.
- Examples that they could draw upon were current and the organisation could relate to them.

It's worth remembering that this could also work against the internal candidate, especially if the candidate's reputation was not so good, and if the department were looking for someone to bring in a set of new fresh ideas. But as a careers adviser, supporting and advising clients daily, I understood where my client was coming from. When researching an organisation, other than speaking to someone who works there, it can be difficult to know what is really going on in the heart of the company. Having access to the company's website, social media, LinkedIn content and videos posted on YouTube helps, but is this enough?

I go with the argument that companies tend to go with the 'safe' bet. The 'unknown' may be scary and if they don't get the 'right' candidate, it could change the dynamic of the team and departments.

So, how can you cope with this experience if it happens to you? Initially you may feel a sense of

anger or that you have had your time wasted. Try to remember that the whole experience will have given you an insight into the company, its culture, its management and its staff. I believe every experience, good or bad, has a purpose in the bigger scheme of things. Also remember that recruitment is a two-way process and the fundamental question that you may well ask yourself is: do you really want to work there?

Having been to job interviews myself, and subsequently discovered that I was 'pipped to the post' by an internal candidate, I know it can leave you feeling distraught, and a bit used by the interview process. The internal candidate clearly has advantages over you but does not mean that you take it lying down! Your resilience should kick in, and your strength and determination can pull you through. Having a strong mind-set is important, as is getting your priorities right, but above all? Doing all that you possibly can prepare for the interview. Remember not every job has an internal candidate and you never know what the interview panel is looking for. They may see something in you that is clearly different from the other candidates.

As someone who has been through this process, I gained a lot from the feedback from those on the interview panel and subsequently received a lot of encouragement. How you move from this experience really depends on you. The world of recruitment is fast moving and opportunities come up when you least expect it. I believe in never giving up and taking the positive from every situation. Be resilient and confident, have a sense of self-belief and self-worth and work on how to communicate this to potential employers. Creating this positive mind-set will give any internal candidate a run for the money, even if they think they have it in the bag. Never ever give up, keep going, and be motivated. The right job is out there for you, it just wasn't your time, but there may be something better for you round the corner!

Anxiety and wellbeing over the course of the pandemic

As the whole of the UK entered a new period of restrictions in 2021, reps attending regional forums reported hearing that members were telling them that their feelings of anxiety were increasing as the pandemic continued. These reports led to us conducting a survey of our members in March 2021 and you told us the following:

While 7% of you were feeling very anxious before the pandemic, this steadily increased to 41% feeling this way by the time of the Jan/Feb lockdown

Those of you who reported feeling 'somewhat anxious' increased from 36% to 86% over the course of the pandemic

There was a five-fold increase in members who felt very anxious about their workload

A quarter of you were fearing you may lose your job and many of you were concerned about not being able to do the job you were employed to do and blurred lines concerning who should do what

Colleges offer a variety of mental health support, but it often isn't used, young workers in particular only used services that remained confidential

Nearly half of you felt that you would need support with your mental health when you returned

The results of this survey were reported in the Times Educational Supplement and MPs heard about your concerns at the education select committee hearing on the 13 July 2021. We have now developed resources for activists to help you to come together and make employers see that they need to help you to look after your mental health.

Activists and reps are invited to attend our mental health webinar at 4pm on 23 September 2021. Find out how to join at unison.org.uk/events. Colleges need more reps to help carry out this important work. If you would be interested in becoming more active in UNISON contact your local branch who can support you to find which role would suit you best: www.unison.org.uk/get-involved/in-your-workplace/official-activist-roles

"We are due a college restructure in August – who knows if our job will be safe – I've worked non-stop throughout the pandemic but that means nothing in regard to a support staff re-structure"

"The pandemic has put a lot more pressure on the team and resources making me fearful that I'll lose my job through lack of support."

"Due to having to shield I felt very worried that I would lose my job when colleges remained open and staff were expected to go into the workplace, I was unable to due to having to shield. I could not be furloughed."

MENTAL HEALTH IN COLLEGES

UNISON ACTIVIST WEBINAR

Thursday 23 September, 4pm

- Mental health at work
- Organising around mental health
- Running a stress awareness workshop

